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Bloomfield, Jon; Steward, Fred

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The Politics of the Green New Deal

JON BLOOMFIELD AND FRED STEWARD

Abstract
Covid-19 has highlighted our fragile relationship with the planet. But it represents a minor challenge compared to the permanent havoc that runaway climate change threatens. Politicians and governments—some at least—are beginning to recognise the scale of the danger.
In this article we assess the evolution of policy thinking on how to make climate transitions happen; the potential of the European Green Deal; and how progressives need to shape it and any UK counterpart to meet the challenges of modern society. The European initiative arises from a broad coalition spanning the political spectrum. Yet, its central thrust of active government offers the prospect of reviving a battered social democracy. We indicate the openings here for a pluralist, ecological left. The run-up to the next global climate conference —COP26—will be a vital period which will show whether parties and governments across the world are prepared to meet the climate change challenge.

Keywords: climate transition, Green Deal, social democracy

FEW IN THE UK noticed. We were on the eve of a tumultuous general election, but on 11 December 2019 the European Commission launched its proposals for a European Green Deal (EGD).[1] The depth of the climate crisis was becoming increasingly clear within the business as well as scientific community; a popular youth movement had emerged; green parties had performed relatively well in the European Parliament elections. During that autumn the European Union (EU), following those elections and the appointment of a new Commission and Council, had already stated that addressing climate change was to be its foremost priority for the coming period. This policy statement was its pitch.

The document was careful and cautious. The size of the EGD programme, although significant in EU terms, was relatively modest. But what the Commission had done—albeit in dry, technical language—was to set out the pathways to change. Responding to the evolving scientific and policy agenda it set out route maps on the crucial questions of how to make the transition to a sustainable society. Rather than vague talk of a 'green revolution' or selective technology hype, it focussed on the need to change systems and offered pathways of sustainability transition in order to address the key arenas damaging our environment. These included the transformation of five key sociotechnical systems—energy, industry, buildings, mobility, and food—responsible for the overwhelming majority of carbon emissions, in addition to managing the three major ecological problem areas—climate, biodiversity, and pollution. It wove these distinct elements of the climate and sustainability story together in a coherent fashion, marking a significant turning point in the relationship between the traditionally separate policy areas of environmental protection and economic development. In broad terms it reoriented the European process of macroeconomic coordination from growth to sustainability. That gave a framework for countries and cities to follow.

The coronavirus pandemic has provided the rocket fuel to launch the programme. Covid-19 has served as a stark warning of humanity's fragile relationship to the planet. While there might eventually be a vaccine for coronavirus, there is no magic potion to cool the Earth. Only concerted, comprehensive action can do that. After a chaotic start, this recognition has jolted EU politicians across the political spectrum into a recognition of the need to act collectively and at

scale. The leaders of Europe's four biggest countries—Germany, France, Italy, and Spain—representing a diverse range of political forces, have led the way in calling for major green recovery programmes. The unprecedented €750 billion 'Repair and Prepare for the Next Generation' programme drafted by the European Commission provides a focus on the key CO_2 emission end uses of energy, buildings, mobility, food and industry, and gives substantial resources to them.[2] Despite the protracted haggling over the programme it gives an important impetus to green deal politics and sets a benchmark for others to follow in the run-up to the next global climate change conference (COP26) scheduled for Glasgow in autumn 2021.

Transformation of systems

At the heart of the Green Deal is the transformation of key consumption/production systems in the economy—energy, transport, buildings and food. This is grounded in transition policy innovations on climate change initiated a decade ago. The UK Low Carbon Transition Plan (2009) and the EU Transition to a Low Carbon Competitive Economy (2011) showed that ambitious climate targets needed to be disaggregated and pursued in all of these specific systems.[3] This precipitated a new alignment of environmental policy with economic, industrial and social policy domains. Transforming these systems meant a renewed 'hands-on' public purpose for a wide range of government departments. It also required new coalitions of individuals and communities, as well as business. Transitions to sustainability implied a new type of transformative policy and politics.

This idea had emerged in the new green politics of the 1970s, which combined advocacy of radical changes in economic policy and social behaviour with high-profile activism around specific environmental issues.[4] This challenged not only capitalist consumerism, but also the redistributive growth model favoured by social democracy. 'Environmental'-ism challenged the fundamentals of 'social'-ism. The political debate soon became framed as a fundamentalist conflict over the principle of economic growth.

The promotion of 'sustainable development' by the UN in the 1980s attempted to reconnect environmentalism with mainstream economic and social policy. Introduced by an experienced social democratic politician, Gro Harlem Brundtland, it embraced the 'systemic' interlocking of ecology with the economy, while seeking to move on from a growth/no-growth binary divide. Its fate was to fall on the fallow ground of the global shift to market-oriented individualism, led by Reagan and Thatcher. As a result, a new post-Brundtland political narrative promoting a 'green economy' was stunted by the new neoliberal orthodoxy.

The subsequent emergence of climate change as the crucial global environmental issue provided a more fertile opportunity. The Kyoto Protocol (1997) bore the hallmarks of neoliberal policy with its reliance on market-based instruments of carbon pricing and emissions trading. However, it also dramatically awakened a new sense of public purpose with the recognition that in order to respect our planetary limits it was necessary to set national, legally binding targets for greenhouse gas reductions.

The designation of climate change as the 'biggest market failure ever' by the influential Stern Review in 2006 led to a growing view that such a transition had to involve public and governmental action, as well as market processes, even if the prevailing paradigm continued to favour the latter.[5] Ambitious targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions began to be adopted by governments across the world, including the UK with its 2008 Climate Change Act. This reclaimed a role for anticipatory target-oriented regulation.

UK developments were part of a wider process of climate policy innovation at international and national levels inspired by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This went way beyond the horizons of the familiar market-led, small-state model, which is why it aroused such vehement opposition from market fundamentalists such as Nigel Lawson. Instead, it implied a renewal of active government to address societal challenges through the transformation of specific systems of everyday production and consumption. This effectively reduced the traction of the purist,

oppositional agenda within the environmental movement. Even in the most successful Green Party in Germany, the *'fundis'* lost out to the *'realos'*.

Green New Deal—birth of an idea

Accompanying this new political direction was an explosion of sustainability transition analogies with historical episodes of transformative change.[6] This was the context in which the idea of a Green New Deal (GND) entered modern political parlance in early 2007. The centrist *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman renounced his earlier belief that a 'magic bullet' Apollo-style mission could address the global dangers of climate change. Instead, he argued that the US needed a huge project of scale as in Roosevelt's pre-war New Deal, which was built 'on a broad range of programs and industrial projects to revitalize America'.[7]

The unfolding of the financial crisis in 2007–9 gave this newborn idea a major impetus. Starting with the UK Green New Deal Group of radical economists and campaigners, the period also saw green new deal ideas expressed in proposals from the German Green Party's political foundation, the European green parties and the UN Environment Programme.[8] Motivated by the dual dangers of the international financial crisis and climate change, they endorsed Keynesian alternatives to the existing orthodoxy, centred on the belief that the government should borrow to invest in a green recovery programme.

Despite its promise, the translation of the idea into practice was limited.[9] The UK stimulus package introduced by Gordon Brown side-lined it. Barack Obama made it part of his 2008 election platform, but the Green New Deal was never championed as a mobilising political narrative compared with the traditional Democrat agenda of health reform. The Green New Deal at this point was an idea in the making. It was not mature enough as a robust and consistent policy framework, embedded within government to be widely adopted in response to the precipitate opportunities of the crisis. Its saddest manifestation was as the label of the Cameron coalition government's flagship home energy saving scheme. Climate Minister Greg Barker declared 'the Green Deal will be the biggest home improvement programme since the Second World War'.[10] In fact, it set back domestic energy saving in the UK: shaped by ideological blinkers, a poorly designed top-down system constrained by austerity policy made the scheme bureaucratically complex and set a very high repayment interest rate on loans for householders. Hardly anyone signed up. Effectively, it sank like a stone but serves as a warning to future governments.

The Green Deal: a 'policy mix' innovation

The Paris Agreement rebooted global climate awareness into a new era. A cluster of extreme weather events provided a real-world backdrop to the follow-up IPCC call in October 2018 for 'rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society to achieve a 1.5°C target'.[11] The year saw the birth of a new, youthful and impatient climate movement. Greta Thunberg initiated school strikes in Sweden, which spread across the globe; Extinction Rebellion launched in the UK on a platform of nonviolent civil disobedience; the US Sunrise movement rose to prominence in the Democrat mid-term primaries

The Green New Deal was reborn in February 2019 as a package of proposed US legislation linking radical environmental and economic programmes, presented by Democrats Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Edward Markey.[12] The initiative triggered a wave of aspirational enthusiasm in the US and internationally. Its welcome by Friedman, despite his own more centrist politics, suggested the potential for a transformative politics with wide reach.[13] This breadth of political appeal was confirmed by the decision of the newly-appointed European Commission to launch its own European Green Deal in December 2019. It too proposed a new coupling of climate and financial policy to put sustainability at the heart of economic strategy. The political leadership in this case, though, was conservative and centrist rather than radical social democrat. Consistent with European traditions of moderate interventionism, it

also reflected the recent nature of its political greening. Fundamentally, however, it expressed a deeper tectonic shift in political terrain triggered by a new global climate reality shaking old party certainties.

Despite the gulf between European and North American discourses, and between moderate and radical interventionism, there are striking similarities in the novel policy architecture shared by the two green deal proposals (see Figure 1 below). Both of them redesign and link three policy pillars with standalone traditions—environmental policy, fiscal policy and industrial policy. This reconfiguration defines the essence of the innovative green deal policy platform.

Firstly, the principal challenges of climate, biodiversity, pollution and waste show a clearer and more comprehensible framing of environmental policy. To address the bewildering variety of threats to world ecosystems of air, land and water, they offer better guideposts than the traditional confusing medley of measures. They increasingly aim for explicit targets to stay within planetary boundaries, seek to address human co-benefits such as health/wellbeing and acknowledge their interconnections with each other.

Secondly, a revolution in fiscal policy recognises two new inextricably linked fundamental goals: to promote targeted financial spending on ecologically sustainable investments and to require serious progress on social equity and universal inclusion.

The third pillar is transformation of the key consumption/production systems of energy, transport, housing and food. Unrealisable aspirations for whole system transformation are resolved through a specific focus on the sociotechnical systems mainly responsible for high emission end-uses and services.[14] Advocacy of pet 'magic bullet' technologies makes way for a variety of systemic transition pathways. Consumers and other stakeholders are given attention as key players. This displaces conventional sectoral industrial policy. Manufacturing industry itself is reframed as part of a transition to a new circular economy.

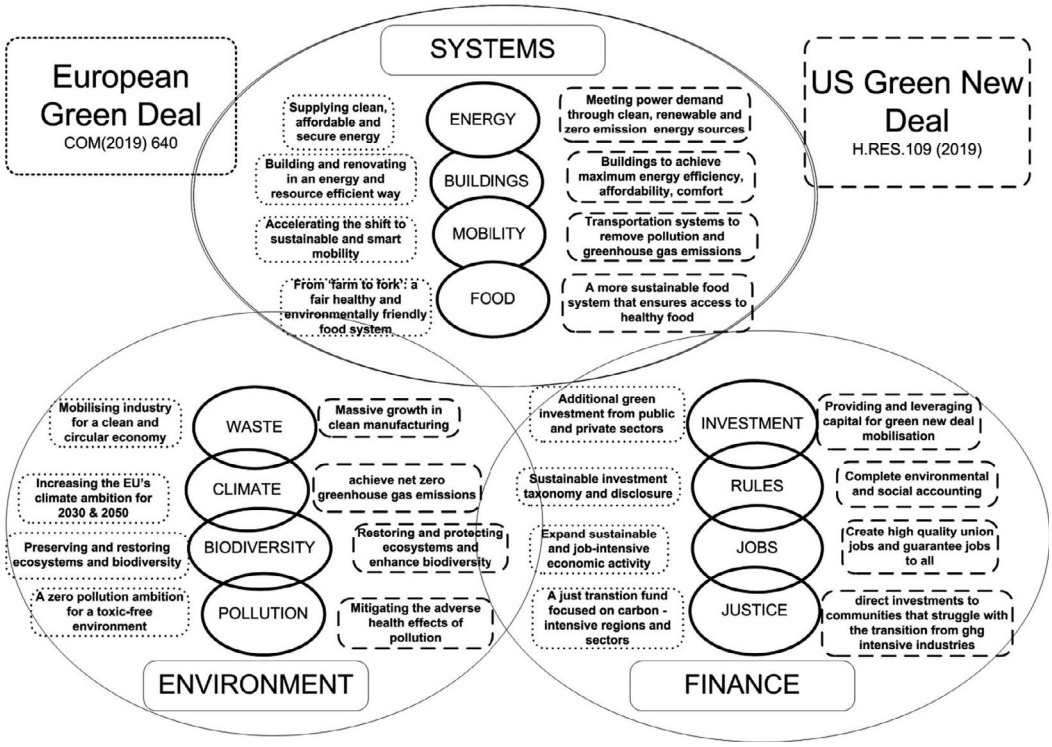

Figure 1: Similarities between the EGD and GND

The Green Deal policy platform chimes with proposals for a new 'sustainable transitions policy' with a wider mix of interventions than just market-based instruments. Its reorientation toward systemic solutions for sustainability transitions, promoted by the European Environment Agency, draws on the policy insights generated by the sustainable transitions community. It challenges the simplistic promotion of a handful of technology winners as a feasible solution.[15]

An opportunity for social democracy?

In the UK the stirrings of the left US Democrats echoed with the homegrown legacy of the earlier socialist and green advocates of a new deal approach. A youthful Labour for a Green New Deal was set up in early 2019 and a host of Green New Deal resolutions were submitted to the Labour Party conference. A manifesto programme titled the Green Industrial Revolution with a national programme of green Keynesianism was given a high profile.

The programme felt more of a shopping list than the policy platform innovations of the US and Europe. Nevertheless, its scale and style resonated with Bernie Sanders' $16 trillion Green New Deal public investment programme launched in August 2019. They both showed a welcome appetite for a more serious scale of public investment and gave much needed attention to social inclusion and a 'just transition'. As Adam Tooze wrote, they have been a touchstone of the revitalisation of the left and seem to offer a route to the rejuvenation of social democracy, battered by its endorsement of the policies of the Blair/Clinton era and unable to address the inequalities generated by the financial crash of 2008.[16]

The heavy defeat of Corbyn's Labour in the 2019 general election, dominated by Brexit and the failure of Sanders' presidential ambitions, signed the death warrant of their specific programmes. Yet, the Green New Deal is shaping the Joe Biden campaign, with Ocasio-Cortez on his Climate Panel, while post-Covid economic recovery planning has put fiscal backbone into the European Green Deal.[17] Given the fundamental dynamics of the climate crisis and the economic recovery, the green deal policy platform is likely to continue to have political purchase. This thinking spans the political spectrum. It's not just Merkel and Macron. Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson dubbed his major speech relaunching the government's post-Covid economic programme in Dudley on 30 June as a 'new deal' with the call to 'build better, build greener'. Many are claiming the mantle of Green New Deal politics.

Green deal politics failed to cut through after the 2008 financial crisis, but post Covid-19 offers a second chance. There is a greater consensus around the need for active government and public investment to help the economy, underpinned by a recognition of the importance of equity to address issues of inequality and disadvantaged regions. This is moving politics onto traditional social democratic terrain, even when it is German Christian democracy and French centrism that is taking it there. The politics of climate transition needs to be developed on a broad, cross-party basis, and it offers major opportunities for social democracy if it is able to embrace a pluralist and environmentalist approach suited to the challenges of the twenty-first century.

So what can a 'social democracy re-born' offer? The starting point has to be a recognition that the climate crisis requires a re-making of everyday politics, on the left as well as the right. The nineteenth and twentieth century model of high-carbon, fossil fuel intensive economies, where the core task is for 'man to conquer nature', has run its course. To safeguard our common future a new low carbon model of sustainable development has to become the 'common sense' of the age. That's what the policy specialists and architects of both green deals have formulated. Politicians and parties across the spectrum are trying to catch up. The anticipated post-Covid green recovery programmes in the run-up to COP26 will show which political forces are best able to translate this thinking into everyday politics and to make low or zero-carbon initiatives the golden thread that runs through their policy proposals.

The elements of active government, collective goods, and social inclusion chime with

the social democratic tradition, yet it needs to overcome the contradictory baggage of utopianism on the one hand, and industrialism on the other. A utopian embrace of an unrealistic financial programme and a fundamentalist 'no growth' narrative would limit the political appeal of the Green New Deal. Ann Pettifor's 'Case for the Green New Deal' offers such a mix. Its first grand mission: 'nothing less than global financial system change' and the replacement of the dollar with 'an international currency independent of the sovereign power of any single, imperial state'.[18] This is combined with a localist, 'steady state' economic agenda. 'Let goods be homespun' is the slogan for a de-carbonised economy in which 'we will not fly; we will give up meat and grow and consume local, seasonal, slow food. We will make and repair our own garments'. This may be fine for a long-term, eco-socialist manifesto. However, a transformative programme to address vital, shorter-term goals on climate change is different. This is what the Green New Deal can offer—a radical reform programme to reach the targets set by the IPCC.

In sharp contrast, the mainstream Labour offer of a green industrial revolution is marked more by traditional industrialism than utopianism. The potential is there for a new green Labour model but to realise it, progressive politicians from socialist, environmental and liberal traditions need to deepen and modernise the existing green deal narrative, as recently achieved in the French local elections.[19] There are four areas in particular where a shift in thinking is needed.

Firstly, it needs to adopt a twenty-first century modernity. The green industrial revolution should no longer be the metaphor of choice. Nostalgia-laden labels of Northern Powerhouse and Midlands Engine have been promoted by Conservative governments and happily shared by Labour. 'Shovel-ready' remains the favourite requirement for public investment. They speak to a technocratic, top-down model of traditional Keynesianism. This conjures images from the past while constricting the imagination of the present and future. The potential of a mix of social innovation and digital revolution to transform 'soft' infrastructure needs to be at the heart of green deal proposals. Currently they play second fiddle to 'hard' infrastructure investment. Yet, new tech opens new vistas. Cities from Manchester to Milan are responding to the Covid-19 pandemic by reconfiguring their urban systems. Digital platforms and applications offer simplified ticketing, real-time travel information, integrated transport options and cycle and vehicle sharing. A focus limited to public financing of electric car ownership completely misses this. There is a vacancy for a twenty-first century city mayor whose epitaph of platform socialism would be the modern equivalent of nineteenth century Joseph Chamberlain's municipal socialism.[20]

Secondly, the Green New Deal rightly stresses the centrality of jobs and material sufficiency for all as the necessary co-benefits of environmental actions. However, this too readily slips into an implicitly economistic view of people's aspirations. The potential widespread attractiveness of changes in lifestyle through sustainability transitions—both for individuals and institutions—does not get a look-in. The fear of being accused of preachiness leaves an unsustainable consumption landscape uncontested. Telling people what to do does not work, but lifestyle changes are an essential part of a sustainability transition. The transformation of our consumption/production systems can enable lifestyle changes that are popular. The unexpected side-effects of the Covid crisis have included clean air, less commuting and hearing birds sing. In the medium term, the mobility transition offers convenience, the food transition offers health, the buildings transition offers comfort and lower fuel bills. The absence of positive lifestyle policies is a serious political shortcoming which a new green Labour combination needs to pursue.

Thirdly, Green New Deal politics seeks to restore a significant role for working people and local communities in the sustainability transition. Yet, this can sometimes manifest itself as a return to an old fashioned and unrealistic type of class politics. The choice is neither a simplistic model of business-led green transformation, nor the suggestion that the labour movement is the primary social force to lead change. Pluralism has to be at the heart of any successful green deal movement. Successful sustainability transitions rely on a wide alliance of social actors with

a shared vision. The key challenge is to show positive opportunities for new broad coalitions for system transitions which combine environmental and employment benefits. For example, in the buildings transition, large refurbishment and retrofit programmes should develop a coalition of actors representing building workers, city authorities, community and tenants' organisations, banks and supply companies.[21]

Fourthly, the twenty-first century world is interdependent. We live in a world where the local and regional overlap and are intertwined with the national, continental and global. The interconnections are all the stronger when it comes to tackling a great societal challenge like climate change, which is why centralised, top-down methods are not the answer. Rather than reheat an old, mission-driven approach, sustainability transitions need a challenge-led approach where national government specifies the broad direction, but acknowledges that experimentation around a diversity of solutions must be nurtured with groups of stakeholders at local and city level. The classic big national projects find this very difficult: they favour national 'rollout' with budgets held in Whitehall and local authorities administering central government decisions. The debacle of the UK's Covid test and trace programme has served to highlight the limitations of this model of politics. Central to the green deal should be transition programmes which set clear sustainability targets, but where budgets are devolved to enable localities to design initiatives appropriate to their needs in partnership with local stakeholders.[22]

At the same time, no nation stands alone. A post-Brexit UK will need to find sensible ways to link up with its near neighbours. The present government proposes a sharp break from the EU, but a progressive alliance should recognise the importance of cross-border collaboration on the issue. Furthermore, Europe no longer sits at the centre of the world and whatever the illusions of Prime Minister Johnson, neither does the UK. Green deal advocates require a wider lens. There is no way that the climate crisis can be tackled without the active participation of Asia; engagement with China prior to the next COP26 is essential, despite other areas of political disagreement.[23]

Thus new mindsets on the left are required if social democracy is to revive by taking the climate change agenda fully on board. The UK menu of New Labour or Blue Labour; Fabian centralism, or Bennite 'socialism in one country' belongs to the past. Green dealers in the UK, as in the rest of Europe, need to welcome and embrace the pluralism and diversity of the climate change movements and recognise that climate change requires citizen engagement at all political levels. For a renewed social democracy to be at the heart of green deal politics it has to create a new model of politics which combines the social with the environmental.

The post-Covid-19 opportunity

The urgency of the climate change crisis has been growing visibly. Public concern has risen markedly, while there's an increasing recognition of the global emergency within the business and financial community. In the UK, Sir John Gieve, former deputy governor of the Bank of England, has called for a huge investment programme with the Green New Deal at its centre. Other powerful business voices are urging the government to pursue a similar green recovery pathway.[24]

It's an important moment for the UK, especially in its role as chair of the forthcoming COP26 conference. The Prime Minister has spoken in general terms about the need for green investment. Ed Miliband, as Shadow Business and Energy Secretary, has called for a zero carbon army of tens of thousands of workers to launch a Green New Deal.[25] Yet, big political doubts remain. Are governments and parties able to make the transformation required? The squalid haggling at the EU Council summit in July over Europe's Green Deal showed how easily visionary politics can get drowned out by parochial concerns. The fact that two of the 'frugal four'—Denmark and Sweden—are led by social democratic prime ministers warns against any easy belief that social democracy will lead this new green wave. Furthermore, the absence of any mass pressure at the summit—no protests, rallies, coordinated letters in the media from influential players—highlighted the absence of a European 'demos'. In the silence and political vacuum, old politics reasserted itself.

What has been outlined here is a transformative vision of twenty-first century politics that operates at the local, national, European and global scale. Both the European Green Deal and the US Green New Deal proposals offer solid frameworks around which to shape the policy ambition for large-scale investment programmes to foster green economic transition. The run-up to COP26 will show which political forces are up to the task. For the UK and European left, it offers major opportunities to revive their fortunes. However, to do so they'll need to embrace a pluralist and environmentalist social democracy suited to the challenges of the twenty-first century. A green social democratic policy framework is there, but it remains to be seen whether they have the will and capability to translate them into a viable politics.

Jon Bloomfield is Honorary Research Fellow, Institute of Local Government Studies, University of Birmingham and Policy Advisor on the EU Climate KIC programme. *Fred Steward* is Emeritus Professor, Policy Studies Institute, University of Westminster, Visiting Professor, Centre for Environmental Policy, Imperial College, London, and Member of the Scientific Committee of the European Environment Agency.

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